PETER HANSEN
FIRST WATCH

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First Watch
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Cover Design by L.C. Chase
Editor: Rachel Haimowitz
Layout: L.C. Chase

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About First Watch

Do you want to live? In the darkness of a WWI battlefield, young Legionnaire Edouard Montreuil lies dying. As teeth nibble his flesh, a voice whispers in his ear, *Do you want to live?* Frightened and desperate, Edouard bargains his freedom for a second chance.

Aboard the Flèche, a grim submarine captained by the nightmare who granted Edouard new life, Edouard pays the price for his survival. Each night, he gives his body to his captain as the bells sound first watch. But surviving is not living, and as the days stretch into months beneath the waves, Edouard grows desperate for escape.

Can Edouard's old comrade Farid Ruiz help him break this devil's bargain, or will Ruiz fall to the same fate, trapped beneath the waves at the mercy of a monster whose hunger knows no bounds? Edouard and Ruiz served together once before, and slept together too, but courage and passion failed to save them from the eldritch beasts who roamed the night. This time, the cost of failure is nothing so clean or simple as death, and the spoils of victory are not just life, but love.

For Rachel Haimowitz, editrix extraordinaire
and partner in marginalia.

First Watch

PETER HANSEN

The dog watch shaded into the first watch, and at the eighth bell, Edouard Montreuil put aside his pen and rose from his bunk. He locked his letter carefully in his sea chest, then buttoned his shirt collar up against his throat. A useless gesture, he knew—it'd be undone for him within the first moments—but he took pride in small signs of resistance.

The other men on first watch went to their stations at the observation deck or the con, and the night crew of engineers went aft to spell the men in the engine room. Edouard walked with them, as he always did, and they ignored him, as they always did. They, too, had their reasons for serving on the *Flèche*; better not to ask what debts a fellow crewman was repaying beneath the waves.

They'd been submerged for three days now, and the air was thick and hot and stale. The engine room hummed faintly. Behind their tight steel cages, the electric lights gleamed white and steady.

An assistant engineer on dog watch gave Edouard a worried look, and he raised his chin at the pity in it. "Go to your bunk, Valancourt," he said. If he didn't have the rank to enforce the order, neither did Valancourt have the will to stay. The crew knew why he passed through the engine room to the captain's cabin night after night. If they didn't, it was only willful ignorance.

He ducked his head and slid through the aft portal sideways, like a long-limbed crab. *Stork,* Ruiz had called him back in *la Légion*, when they'd all been looking for new names. *All long legs.* For a moment, Edouard stood in the narrow passage between the officers' quarters and the engine room, remembering the way the sun had beat down on his brow in Algeria and the way Ruiz had laughed. He passed the alcove where the officers bunked, and rapped on the door of the captain's cabin.

"Come in," said a voice from inside—inside the cabin, or inside his own head, he'd never been able to say. It made his ears ache; it made his blood heat and his heart thrum in time with the engines until he thought his skin would burst.

He turned the handle and swung the door open, then shut it behind him. Closed away the light of the engine room, and closed himself into the darkness.

"Sir," he said, and swallowed against the constriction of his collar. "Reporting for duty."

"Good," said the captain, and a limb like a wet cable fell cool and slick upon Edouard's wrist. His lips found Edouard's throat, sharp teeth catching there as he undid those carefully-closed shirt buttons.

A second mouth brushed over Edouard's ribs, tongue wet with a viscous fluid that chilled his skin. A third latched at his hip, needle-teeth scraping, seizing. "Very good," said the captain, against his throat and chest and hip, as his boneless fingers wrapped slowly over Edouard's cock and coaxed it hard. Edouard's skin crawled, but he willed himself still.

Two of those hungry mouths smiled, and the third whispered, "Then let us begin."

My dear Farid Ruiz,

I cannot say how many times I have begun this letter and failed to send it. At first I thought I would charm you in French, but I have nothing charming to say, so I beseech you plainly in this formal Spanish: Come to Tarifa with all speed. My letters may be read, so I will say only that it is an urgent matter requiring your utmost discretion.

I will be waiting for you in a restaurant known as El Pobrecito, and there I shall remain at six o'clock every night until I am forced to depart.

Yours sincerely,

Edouard Montreuil.
Tarifa, Spain
3 July, 1926.

A flash of lightning illuminated Edouard's cup, casting a stark shadow along the curve of the rim. He brought it to his lips, sipping only sparingly at the coffee. They made it black here, and bitter; Edouard had never much cared for coffee, but they hadn't any tea, and he needed his head clear.

Beside him, the wind dashed braids of rain against the windowpane. He tilted his chair back, letting it rest on the rearmost legs as he raised his arms in a stretch. He glanced out the window as he cracked his neck from one side to the other, but the rain was too thick for him to make out the far side of the street. *Come on, Ruiz,* he thought, as though it would bring the man running with the lightning at his back. *Come out of the rain.*

He would have counted the seconds before the thunder came, but the peal rolled in on the lightning's heels and rattled the glasses behind the bar. In the relative dimness after the flash, he finished his coffee and frowned at the dregs.

"More coffee?" asked the young serving woman, and he raised his cup for her to fill anew. She spoke Spanish with an accent he couldn't place; it wasn't Castilian or Catalan, and it certainly wasn't from the former colonies. He ought to have found it unremarkable, in a port city like Tarifa, but his hackles were already up—and she must have seen that he was giving her a hawkish look, because as she poured his coffee, she said, "If I can help you with anything . . ."

"I've been trying to place your charming accent," said Edouard, and his own native French colored every consonant. "You're a long way from home, I suspect."

"Asturias," she said. Her eyes crinkled a little at the question; she looked so delighted to have been asked he felt his suspicions evaporate. "I followed my husband from there when he was called to serve. He's a lieutenant—"

The door crashed against the wall and sent the hatstand spinning, and the serving-woman startled at the clamor—she canted the coffee pot up too quickly, spilling a long line of tepid coffee across Edouard's sleeve. The storm swept across the threshold, and with it, a man in a black Mackintosh coat. He drew off his hat, shaking his head like a long-haired pup and scattering drops of water over the nearest

patrons. "Where's Montreuil?" he demanded. "Edouard Montreuil, where is he? I'm here to meet with him."

Edouard rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling. *He hasn't changed a bit.* "Farid Ruiz," he said with a rather fixed smile. "When I tell you that I've an urgent matter requiring your *utmost discretion*—"

"I nearly didn't get your letter," said Ruiz, his wet boots squeaking on the polished wood as he crossed from the doorway. "If it had come even a day later, I'd have been on the next flight for the Canary Islands, and then you'd have been drinking alone—and so much for your urgent matter! So much for your utmost discretion! Buy me a glass of good beer, Montreuil; I'm soaked to the skin." He dropped into the seat across from Edouard's, propping up his elbows on the table. He was indeed soaked to the skin, and the rain slicking his black Mackintosh had already begun to puddle beneath his chair. The Asturian serving woman smothered a laugh with her hand and brought him a cup and saucer, but he only gave her a tragic look when she began to fill it with coffee.

"Not a drop of beer?" he asked, and he fluttered his long, dark lashes at her. "Not a drop of rum? It's not proper coffee without a drop of rum in it."

"Not a drop," said Edouard firmly. "We've business to discuss, and we'll drink once we've concluded it."

"Then on to your business, you old stork." Ruiz downed the coffee in a long gulp, grimacing at the bitterness. "There, I've fortified myself. I assume it's something to do with *la Légion*, if you wrote *me* about it?"

"Something like that," replied Edouard, voice lowered—he didn't particularly expect Ruiz to take the hint, but at least his own half of the conversation might be quiet. "Do you remember Algeria?"

"I'll never *forget* Algeria. Mosquitoes everywhere, skirmishes with the locals, damn Belaire with his *Carthagum delendum esta.*"

"*Carthago delenda est,*" Edouard corrected absently. "And you remember what you did, when your colonel took that little Algerian boy and—"

Ruiz's hand tightened on the coffee cup until the delicate handle cracked free. A shard of porcelain must have scored his skin, because

a drop of blood fell to the saucer. "That bastard," said Ruiz, and now his voice was as soft as Edouard might have wished. "He deserved what he got."

"And *la Légion* went on functioning just as it should. No snags in the business; no pauses for the damn courts-martial to decide whether he'd disqualified himself for duty; the men decided the sentence and carried it out. Everyone was *happy* with it."

"As happy as you can be, when you've killed one of your own," said Ruiz. Behind him, the serving woman was turning up the gaslamps against the oncoming darkness; the occasional flash from the window was blue and sharp with sea-lightning. *Pobrecito, indeed. Too poor to have been electrified.*

Ruiz sucked the blood from his thumb, then rested his chin on his fist. "If you dragged me here to bring up the worst parts of my service, I'm putting my hat back on and going to find a drink."

"I've dragged you here," said Edouard, "because my captain is a monster, and we go to sea as soon as we've a full crew."

Ruiz tilted his head at that, his dark brows going up. He had strong features, only very faintly Spaniard—Edouard imagined he was the scion of *conversos* and *morenos*, simmering for generations under the Spanish thumb. Small wonder Fernando Ruiz had changed his name and joined *la Légion*. And small wonder he'd put a gun to his colonel's head and blown him away.

Edouard's hands were shaking. If he were to put his cup down on the saucer, the rattle would give him away.

"By the time we reach port in Tartous," said Edouard, "I want him floating belly-up the Mediterranean. I want the crew to come out of it *thanking* me for killing him."

"And following your orders? That's what you're after, yeah?"

"I don't like your tone, Ruiz." He took a long drink of coffee, giving himself time to calm his nerves, then set the cup very deliberately down. "I can live with another man's command. If he's a good man."

"You don't get many of those," said Ruiz, bracing his chin on his hand. "I thought I could kill all of the bastards, and then the good men would rise to the top. But all I got were more bastards." He raised his empty cup, and that toast said, *To the revolution that never was.*

Edouard raised his cup in answer, letting it click against Ruiz's before tossing back the last of his coffee.

Outside, lightning cut across the street. Three seconds later, thunder rolled in behind it. "Promise me," said Ruiz. "*Promise* me you have good reason to want your captain dead."

A dozen clinging mouths, a long limb like a rope, wrapping around his throat and squeezing until he saw stars . . .

For a moment, Edouard's throat closed. He couldn't bring himself to meet Ruiz's eyes. "If I thought there was any other way to do this, I'd have done it," he said, still thick-tongued and aching. "If I thought for a second I could just kill him myself, or even walk away—"

"You can't walk away from a monster," agreed Ruiz.

"You can't. Because he'll *find* you."

Ruiz brought his hand up to gnaw lightly at his thumbnail, but he said nothing. His breathing was even, his gaze clear and steady.

"Will you help me?" Edouard asked, and he hated how small and weak he sounded. "I'll be happy to repay you—"

"I'll help you because you need helping. Now, buy me a fucking beer, stork. If I'm to turn mutineer, I'm going to need a damn good drink."

Once Farid Ruiz had made his mind up, he seldom asked questions. He did not ask, *What has your captain done to you?* or *Do you have any allies among your crewmen?* or *What line of work are you in?* or even *What kind of damn ship are you on?*—but he reported at the appointed hour, five-thirty sharp, and watched the sun rise over the Atlantic with sleep-crusted eyes. He had a narrow sea chest perched on one shoulder—to shield his face from passers-by, Edouard thought at first, but Ruiz had only a passing acquaintance with discretion and had never heard of stealth. "Well?" he asked, yawning like a cat. "Where are we going? I assume you're a seaman and not an airman, or you'd be launching from Granada—"

"A submariner," said Edouard. "There are hangars in Tarifa."

"There aren't *good* hangars in Tarifa," grumbled Ruiz, but he suffered himself to be led along the docks, away from the fishing boats

and the broad merchant steamers. The planks were still damp from last night's storm, with shallow pools darkening the spaces around the knots in the wood. "And you'd think you'd be able to find a good cup of coffee in this town, at this hour, but you'd be wrong."

"What's Tarifa ever done to you?"

"It's *existed*, which is enough to begin with. Son of a *bitch*, why should you have dragged me out of bed at the crack of dawn? We're not damn Legionnaires anymore."

"Because by five-thirty, the second mate has had time to leave his watch, fuck his latest mistress, and have his morning coffee," said Edouard. "And then he goes to the office to take applicants for our open posts. I need you aboard; I need yours to be the first name he writes in his ledger today."

"Why, Montreuil," Ruiz laughed. "You know just what to say to make a man feel wanted. You'll have to be careful not to give me ideas. It's close quarters, I've heard . . ."

Edouard felt his throat slowly closing. *Close quarters, indeed*, he thought, with a rising hilarity that bordered on panic. "Have whatever ideas you like," he said, not bothering to hide his disdain. "If your convictions won't carry you into this business, I'd be happy to offer other inducements."

"Spoken just like a Swiss," said Ruiz, but he must have heard the edge to Edouard's voice because he said nothing further. It wasn't quite sympathy, but neither was it pity; it afforded Edouard something like self-respect as they walked in the shadow of the Castillo de Santa Catalina.

The officers of the *Flèche* had rented a small office very near to the docks for the duration of their stay in Tarifa—a squalid little room scarcely bigger than a cupboard, containing a small escritoire with a wad of paper under one leg, two chairs, and an electric lamp that flickered as though mice had gnawed at the wiring. The door to the office stood ajar, for even men long used to the proximity of a submarine might feel cramped in that narrow space—and the men of the *Flèche* above all others craved open air. Despite the unlatched door, Edouard knocked on the doorframe for formality's sake. "Any berths left?"

"Just the one," said the second mate, raising himself from the chair like an accordion slowly unfolding. He was a reedy little man, with dark Catalan eyes and thin lips. As Edouard had suspected, he still smelled faintly of coffee and sex. "Where'd you find this strapping fellow, Montreuil? A pub floor? You know we don't 'press men—"

"No, we're all willing sailors," Edouard said, and the second mate laughed mirthlessly. "This is Farid Ruiz. We served together in *la Légion*. Algeria. He's an airman."

"Was an airman," said Ruiz, offering his hand to be shaken. The mate didn't take it. "I'm at liberty just now."

"Discharged, were you?"

Ruiz hesitated, and the second mate filled in the gap.

"Deserted, then," he said, lifting both wispy brows. Ruiz didn't deny it.

Edouard's breath lodged in his throat. *That's it, then. He's going to turn Ruiz away. Now who will help me?*

"We've never had a man desert once he's signed," said the second mate. His expression was cool and placid, but if Ruiz couldn't hear the warning in his voice, then he was stone deaf. "Not a one. The captain wouldn't stand for it."

Ruiz glanced down at his still-extended palm, and reluctantly, the second mate took it and shook. Ruiz was not a particularly tall man, but he had broad shoulders and broad hands and muscles like ropes—he was still bursting with the vitality that had drawn Edouard's eye six years ago—and his hand swallowed up the second mate's.

"That's settled, then," said Ruiz. "When do I begin?"

"Montreuil will show you to your berth. If you have goodbyes to say, then say them now. Once you've signed, we'll have a full crew."

This is it, then. Ruiz's pen scratched at the paper, leaving a spiked signature behind. Several lines up, near the top of the page, Edouard's own name marked the ledger. *After this voyage, I'll be free.*

"Well," said Ruiz. "That was the most lackluster recruiting I've ever seen. How the hell did you get yourself into *this* one, Montreuil?"

Edouard forced a laugh. *How did I get myself into this? Ask an easy question. Ask me the size of the universe, or why God lets men suffer—any easy question.* "How does a man get himself into anything?" he said, carefully light. "I had debts—"

Ruiz snorted and shifted his grip on his sea chest. "Like hell you had debts. You're sober as a churchman. You don't drink or gamble. You have modest tastes. Son of a whore, what were you indebted *for*?"

"I'd rather not discuss it," said Edouard tightly. "Grant me at least a few inches of dignity."

"You've done a lot of asking in the last twenty-four hours."

Stepping into the aft hatch, one foot braced on the ladder, Edouard glanced over his shoulder. "You don't *have* to help me, Ruiz. You can turn around and go back to Granada. There might still be a flight waiting there."

"Nonsense. I've signed," Ruiz replied, as though that settled the matter. Perhaps, as far as Ruiz was concerned, it did. "Now, get off the damn ladder and help me with my sea chest."

He could delay his descent no longer, so he began to climb down into the submarine. The heel of his boots caught on each rung of the ladder; the wrought iron was cold beneath his hands, rough in places with painted-over rust. When they'd been submerged for days, the heat of fifty men's bodies would render the air close and rank and oppressive. But with the hatches open, the passageways echoing and near-empty, it felt cold as a tomb.

Reaching up for Ruiz's sea chest, Edouard closed his hands on the beaten leather cover. He noticed for the first time that some of the upholstery tacks had come free, letting the leather peel up over the age-stained wood. "I have it," he said, for no reason but to hear a human voice.

"Out of the way, then," said Ruiz, and his shadow blocked out the early sunlight. A familiar dread chilled Edouard's blood as he watched the rays grow slim on the near wall.

Then Ruiz's head cleared the hatch. He took his sea chest from Edouard's unresisting arms. "Lead on."

Although Edouard seldom spent his free hours in the crew

quarters, he drew a measure of comfort from them nonetheless—even with more than half the men ashore, even with the electric lights dimmed almost to nothing. In that faint, unwavering glow, he could see the men on middle watch dozing on their pallets, the men on forenoon watch waking to break their fast. A low laugh came from the mess hall, along with the smell of tinned fish.

"Cozy," muttered Ruiz, tucking his sea chest beneath a bank of bunks. He pressed lightly at the chains that held the middle bunk suspended, watching as all three began to sway in unison. The chains made a faint *tick, tick* sound as they moved, like a dozen erratic clocks. In his place, Edouard would have been imagining a thousand sleepless nights beneath the ocean; in his place, Edouard would already have been looking for an escape. "We used canvas, on the *Viento del Sur,*" was all Ruiz said. "It was lighter."

The two of them made their way between the banks of bunks, which rocked softly as the waves lashed the sides of the vessel. *Tick, tick*—that rhythmic click of the chains raised the hairs on the back of Edouard's neck, even as he ducked through the port and into the mess.

The men's laughter died on the air when Edouard stepped in. A few of them gave him a level look as he entered, but most avoided his eyes and returned to their fish and porridge. These men were his own watch; they knew better than to offer him sympathy. He was a foreigner, and a marked man—he wasn't worth their necks.

At the officers' table, the third mate sat with his back to the door. Edouard pressed a fingertip to the inside of Ruiz's wrist and inclined his head toward the table. *There*, he thought, as though Ruiz could hear him. *Look.*

They collected a ration of porridge and weak, sweet tea, then unlatched a table from the wall and pulled a pair of chairs up to it. Whether or not he had taken the hint, Ruiz took the chair closest to the officers' table. He tilted back his chair on its rear legs, tipping tea down his throat as his eyes wandered the narrow mess hall—the same surreptitious trick Edouard would have used in his place.

Edouard tried to see what Ruiz saw: Four men crowded together around a table for a game of marjolet, gambling their wine rations.

Two others playing chess while their porridge grew cold. All speaking low and quickly, half in French and half in Spanish, until the words became an unintelligible wave of sound.

The third mate, broad and pale as a fluke's belly, eating tinned sardines with his sleeves rolled up over his forearms.

Beyond him, in a shadowed corner from which a man could survey the entire mess, the captain—his heavy coat and gloves shrouding his body, his eyes dark and unblinking, his white cheeks almost unnaturally smooth. He caught Edouard's eye, then toasted slowly with his wineglass. His teeth were very white and very sharp, but Edouard knew that expression was the farthest thing from a smile.

I knew you'd return, that gesture said. *It isn't as though you can run.*

Ruiz seized Edouard by the wrist and dragged him out of the mess hall, pushed him up the ladder and through the fore hatch into the sunlight. "You bastard," he said. "You *bastard*, you should have *told* me."

"Told you what? I told you he was a monster. I told you what—"

Ruiz kicked the hatch closed, and the clang of it made Edouard close his mouth so hard his teeth ached. They stood together on the hull, with and the waves rocking them slow and gentle and the gulls screaming for scraps overhead. "You should have told me," Ruiz repeated, though the heat had gone out of his voice. He sounded tired; he sounded like a man who hadn't slept since they'd parted ways. "How long have you served?"

"One year. It's not that kind of contract, the one you signed. You're not bound to him the way I am. Christ, Ruiz, I'd have told you if it were that kind of contract."

Ruiz only folded his arms across his broad chest. His eyes were half-lidded against the glare off the water, his lips pressed tightly together. "But you couldn't tell me what kind of *captain* you had.

You thought I'd run, if I knew."

"Would you have?"

The question lay coiled between them like a viper. Edouard stepped to the rail that surrounded the hatch, putting his hands on the sun-touched metal. He felt Ruiz's eyes on his back. On the docks, the fishermen were beginning to cast out for the morning, their sails hanging near-slack in the breeze and their paddles striking the lapping waves. *Say something,* he thought. *Say anything. Help him forget how you lied to him to bring him here.* "I never told you," he said softly, and ran a hand through his hair, "why I joined *la Légion étrangère.*"

"Most men never said. It was your business. A lot of men joined *la Légion*, after the war. They'd seen things . . ."

Black wings against the sky. Mustard gas creeping over the ground like fog, falling heavy over the men in the trench. The creatures that moved across No Man's Land in the darkness, gnawing at the dead and the dying. "I'd seen things," Edouard said, licking his lips. They were dry enough to crack open. "We all had."

"And you went to Algeria to forget."

"I went to Algeria to *escape*," Edouard snapped. "You see things, Ruiz, and they see *you*, and then you can't get their eyes off you. I thought, if I had the Mediterranean between us . . . But he found me anyway, no matter where I ran. It doesn't matter. I had debts."

Behind him, Ruiz drew in a long breath through his nose. "Tell me about your debts, then. Tell me how you signed onto the *Flèche*."

The rail had warmed beneath Edouard's fingertips. Above them, the square white bulk of Santa Catalina stretched to the sky.

"I was a coward," said Edouard at last. "I was seventeen when I went to serve on the Western Front, and you'd think they would have been *glad* I'd come to help them. I could have stayed in Geneva, and if I'd had any sense I would have, but I *believed* in France." If he flexed his fingers against the rail, he could still feel the invisible seams where his flesh had been blown apart. He pressed his hands into fists and continued, "When the mortar hit, the others left me to die. There were creeping things in the dark, and I could hear them moving out there. The others thought my blood would draw them . . ." Ruiz's hand came to rest on his shoulder. "God help me, I didn't want to

die."

Ruiz didn't have to ask what he meant by *them*. Airmen told stories of the creatures that tore through the clouds in thick storms, their white hands pressing at portholes and their filmy wings full of lightning.

"Someone asked me if I wanted to live, and I said yes. He asked if I would give him my body, and I said yes. I didn't care who it was. It could've been Lucifer himself, so long as he let me live."

He turned, then, to face Ruiz, and his hands went to his buttons, tugging them free of the buttonholes almost violently. He knew what Ruiz would see there, amid bruises shaped like mouths and long red lines of welts.

The contract was inked onto his skin in letters that made his eyes swim and his head ache; it was written in characters that itched like something tickling the inside of his skull.

Ruiz brought his hand up to the bare skin, tracing a sinuous line that meant *mine.* His thumb was hot, callused along one edge, and the work-roughened pad of it caught at the hollow of Edouard's chest. The touch sent a warm, familiar jolt through his body, and Ruiz must have felt the shock of it, because he made a sound like a sigh and drew his hand away.

"This is the contract I signed," said Edouard, closing his shirt up again. "This is the service I agreed to, in exchange for my life. My body, on *his* ship, unto death."

Ruiz smiled, but the lines around his eyes were pained. "I see. And all that business about the crew was only—"

"To make you come, yes. Because you couldn't have understood this, Ruiz. I wanted you to understand it."

"You *wanted* me not to ask questions."

Edouard laughed, low and bitter. "You never ask questions, Ruiz."

"Don't you *toy* with me," snapped Ruiz, catching Edouard by the collar and dragging him close. His breath heated Edouard's cheek, and his fingers snagged in the fabric of his shirt until Edouard could feel it pressing lightly in at his jugular. For an endless, horrible moment, he was back in that dim cabin with a mouth at his cheek and one

at his ribs and long spindly fingers wrapping around his neck—and with a strangled cry he swung a fist at Ruiz's temple.

Ruiz didn't topple, but he let go at once and grabbed for the rail to get his feet under him. "Jesus *fuck*, man, calm yourself!" he said, raising his empty hands. Five fingers on each, with joints and nails and prints at the end of each fingertip. Lifelines and heartlines sweeping over each palm.

Human hands.

Edouard forced himself to breathe. "I'm sorry." His throat still felt half-closed. "Christ, Ruiz."

"You've served under that thing for a year." Ruiz still held himself like a wrestler, elbows out, legs apart, although there was an expression like sympathy in his eyes. "Am I the first you've asked for help?"

"No." *Breathe.* "But you're the first who's ever said yes."

When Ruiz offered his hand, Edouard clasped it. They didn't shake, like men sealing a deal between them; they only stood there, palm to palm, until he could feel their pulses slowing. "I'm not going into this blind," said Ruiz. "When there are free berths and no deserters . . . don't think I don't know what that *means.* And when you can't just leave after your tour is up, I know what that means, too. I saw how scared your mate was. I knew what I was getting into."

Edouard let his hand drop to his side and pulled cigarettes and a matchbook from his trouser pocket. He lit himself a cigarette and pressed another into Ruiz's waiting hand, then tossed the match into the waves. "You didn't know what he was."

"No," agreed Ruiz, drawing in a first, deep breath of tobacco smoke. "But I knew he might kill me, and that hasn't changed, no matter what he is. I'm not going in blind, stork. One-eyed at worst, but never blind."

"That's heartening." And against his better judgment, he *did* feel heartened.

They stood smoking quietly until their cigarettes burned down to their fingers, and then they could put off descending no longer. Once they'd cast the fag ends into the sea, Ruiz pulled open the hatch, and Edouard climbed hand over hand into the belly of the submarine.

As they reentered the mess hall, the third mate caught and held

Edouard's gaze. *I saw you two go off together,* his eyes seemed to say. *Don't think your captain missed it.*

Edouard raised his fist to rap once at the door to the captain's cabin. From inside came a voice like the clatter of a bullet being dropped on a surgeon's tray. *Come in,* it said. Edouard could feel it behind his ears, along the thick knobs of bone at the base of his skull. *Come in, Cigüeña.*

Cigüeña. The word sent an icy pang through him. *Cigogne. Stork.* Clamping down on the panic threatening to paralyze him, Edouard pushed the door open and stepped into the dim blue light.

The captain sat at a narrow desk of polished black wood, a glass of wine to one side of him and a stack of papers to the other. *Contracts,* thought Edouard at once, but he knew better than any how his captain wrote contracts.

"Come in," said the captain with a white-toothed smile. But for the teeth, he could have been any handsome man when he smiled like that; the gloves hid his hands and the coat hid the rest of him, leaving bare nothing but the long column of his neck. Had the captain been any other man, Edouard might have imagined putting his lips to that neck and teasing with his teeth until he raised a bruise.

He knew that flesh too well, though. A mirror hung behind the captain's chair, but Edouard couldn't bring himself to look at it. He wouldn't like what he'd see.

He folded his arms behind his back, schooling his face to impassivity. "Reporting for duty, sir," he said. "What are your orders?"

The captain brought his gloved hand to his lips and ran black leather over bloodless skin with the tip of his middle finger. "You've brought a friend," he said. His voice was very soft, his face tranquil and unlined. No hint of the roiling jealousy Edouard knew lay beneath. "Do I not satisfy you, Edouard Montreuil? Do you require more than I've given you?"

In the ensuing silence, Edouard could hear a faint patter of

droplets upon the steel floor. His hands felt slick—his arms were splitting along those invisible seams where the captain had knitted his flesh together. He didn't look at them, though he could smell a familiar tang like old copper.

This game again. At least I know the rules.

"You satisfy me, sir." He lowered his voice, letting the captain mistake his deference for intimacy. His hands didn't hurt, but deep in his forearms, the bones were tensed as though they meant to shatter. "I require no more than you've given me."

At the nape of his neck, his hairs were standing on end, but if he raised his hands to smooth them down he'd have to *look* at his hands, and he couldn't bear to. "What do you have for me this evening?" he said instead, as though he were asking about any other sort of work. As though this was a game they both enjoyed.

Slowly, deliberately, the captain caught the finger of his glove between his teeth and tugged it free. He worked each finger loose, one at a time, pinched the glove between thumb and forefinger and drew it off.

Edouard didn't look at those boneless hands. He knew each soft inch of them intimately; he knew the way the delicate suckers raised welts on his flesh, the shape of the thin lips at the sinuous wrist. "Undress," said the captain, and Edouard looked to his shirt-buttons so he wouldn't have to meet those dark, liquid eyes.

Collar, sleeves. Untuck the hem from the waistband and undo the buttons from sternum to navel. If each task were separate, and he could divorce each separate action from the totality of what he was about to do, then he could manage to obey. Even manage to make it seem like he wanted it. *Undershirt. Boots, socks, fly. Trousers and underwear; do them together.* He peeled the trouser legs down over his knees, then stepped free of the dark puddle of them and closed his eyes. He'd gotten blood on his clothes.

A slick, heavy hand came to rest at the small of his back, tracing up along his spine until it cupped the back of his neck. *Look up*, said the captain, and Edouard raised his head to look into the mirror.

The cabin was dark, although the lights still shone faintly in their sockets. He registered this first of all, and then his own pale shape at

the center of that darkness. He didn't dwell on the paleness of his hair or the letters like sutures along his chest and arms or the blood on his hands. He didn't meet his own eyes as the captain threaded three long, slim limbs around his waist. *Like a lover's embrace,* he thought. *He wants me to see him as a lover.*

The captain rested his narrow chin on Edouard's shoulder, and just beneath his shoulder blade, one of those dozen mouths left a suckling kiss. *Aren't we beautiful like this?* thought Edouard, and whether it was his own thought or the captain's, he couldn't have said.

He turned his head for a kiss, because if he kept looking at their reflection he would see the teeth gleaming in the darkness all around him. He would see the limbs like thick, pulsating ropes, each one glistening wetly in the half-light. With his mouth open, his eyes closed, he could condense the whole world to the prick of those needle-teeth in his lower lip, the probing of that long tongue. If he could forget who was doing this to him, give himself over to sensation, then he'd open to the touch. He let slip a low, muffled sound, and he couldn't have said if it was encouragement or refusal but it was *need*, and that tongue stroked him open as another set of teeth grazed his neck.

A limb caught at his thigh, latching there with mouths or suckers or God only knew what, but it held him fast; another wrapped tightly around his other ankle and pulled his legs apart. Between them, a long finger searched and stretched—it was easier if he thought of it as a finger. Easier to imagine he was kissing a man who had him bound in thick ropes, who rocked against him and into him with long, probing fingers. Those teeth on his nipples were some other man's teeth, and the delicious ache where they closed had nothing to do with his debts. The slickness streaming down his wrists was sweat or semen or anything but blood; the tentacles wrapped around his cock were some other man's hands—

"Look," said the captain, the word vibrating through the whole of his vast body. "Look at yourself, Edouard Montreuil," and the voice at the back of Edouard's skull said *Cigüeña*.

Edouard opened his eyes on the kind of darkness that lived in the deepest places of the earth. It was the darkness of the deep sea, of vast and ancient caves, of the coffin; it was a darkness that swallowed

men whole. Within that darkness, he hung suspended like a wisp of foxfire.

In the mirror, he saw himself devoured by a hundred mouths, wrapped in a hundred writhing limbs—and he saw himself buck his hips against that darkness and let it consume him.

Edouard dragged himself to his bunk at midnight, when the eighth bell called the men to middle watch. He'd lost his shirt in the tangle of the captain's cabin, and he couldn't bring himself to search it out again. In one hand, he carried his shoes with the socks stuffed into the openings; he tried not to watch how the socks grew slowly wet with blood.

He'd washed up in the head, not that it had helped. His skin felt scraped raw, and all along his arms lay seeping wounds wet with blood or slime. Bandaging them would be a waste; the wounds would be gone by morning.

His hard metal bunk swayed as he crawled in, but he ignored the click of the chains and dragged his blanket around his shoulders.

"Montreuil," came a low voice from the passage between the bunks. When he didn't turn over, Ruiz tried, "Edouard."

"Go away, Ruiz," he told the wall of the submarine. "I've stood my watch. I want to sleep."

"Your arms are bleeding." Ruiz tugged at Edouard's wrist. "It's a queer kind of watch you stand, that makes your arms bleed like that."

With a groan, Edouard turned over to face him. The engineers had dimmed the lights in the crew quarters to simulate nightfall, and against that dimness, Ruiz was barely more than a silhouette; the light spilling in from the mess hall picked out a gleam in one of his eyes and half his smile. It was a forced smile, the lines of his lips tense over his teeth. "I lost both my arms in the war," said Edouard eventually. "When he thinks I'm not properly grateful, he shows me the cracks where he knit my arms back together. They'll be fine by morning. Look," he said, and he thrust an arm over the side of the

bunk where the faint light could catch in the crevices. "It's already healing."

Ruiz studied the marks like a map, fingertips following the constellations of script and the ridges of flesh. His thumb traced the deep fissure at the wrist where a shattered bone had torn through skin. There were round red marks around the wrist in even sets of two, like eyelets on a boot. "What are these?"

"Have you ever caught squid in the deep water?" asked Edouard. "Or octopi in the shallows? And have you seen the suckers on their arms?"

Ruiz stilled a moment, one hand at Edouard's pulse point and the other resting on his own knee. "Ah," he said at last, heavily. "Ah. I think I see." He turned then, resting the back of his neck against the edge of the swaying bunk. To another man, it might have looked like dismissal, but it put his ears close enough to Edouard's lips to let them speak in something like privacy.

"He called me 'Cigüeña,'" said Edouard, his voice only a breath. "He's heard you speak to me; he might even know why I brought you here." *He must have heard Ruiz say it. If he heard one of us* think *it, would he have been content to let me go?*

"Then we're running out of time. I've got the morning watch. Three bells?"

"Three," he agreed, but his fingers pressed to Ruiz's bare shoulder in a series of taps. *Four.* When he saw what he thought was a nod, he breathed out. Forcing his voice louder, lighter, he added, "Tomorrow, we'll make landfall in Sardinia to replenish our fuel."

"I know *that*," huffed Ruiz. "They told us *that* at supper. If you're going to quote the mate at me, then for God's sake let me sleep."

Edouard couldn't help laughing, although his ribs were tight and aching and someone across the aisle threw a sock at him to shut him up. "Go to sleep then, you son of a bitch," he said fondly, slipping into the rough, comfortable profanity of Spanish. "You could fall asleep on anything, back in Algeria—sandbags, mules, your own vomit . . ."

"I fell asleep against the spare tire of a 1924 Hispano-Suiza, once," said Ruiz, and he sounded proud of it. "Didn't wake until they started the engine."

Edouard gave the back of Ruiz's head a light push. "Can you sleep on a submarine bunk?"

"That's the one thing I can't manage," laughed Ruiz. His was a low, warm, rumbling laugh that Edouard felt deep in the pit of his chest; it was a laugh like a purr of contentment, resonant in a way that was nothing like the metallic hum of the engines.

It was no less of a relief to know Ruiz only laughed like that to raise Edouard's spirits.

Ruiz pushed himself to his feet then, dusting off his backside and his knees, and felt his way along the aisle until he found his own bunk: second from the entryway, starboard side, middle bunk. Above him, another man on the dog watch lay cocooned in his blankets; below him lay the empty bunk of a man on middle watch.

Edouard knew he should sleep, too, but his hands and arms itched as they healed, and his heart battered at his ribs.

At six o'clock tomorrow morning, he would be a free man or a dead one, and he had no idea what that would mean. At the moment when his knife struck home, would his hands shatter, his gut and cheek rip open? Would he bleed to death on the floor of the mess hall?

And if they failed, what then? The captain was patient as the tides; he had followed Edouard across eight years and the open seas, writing contracts on dead men's skins to bring them to life again. He had been a scavenger once, no more than a shadow and a brush of teeth on the battlefield. Peacetime had served him well. Patience had served him well. A creature like that could take its revenge over centuries.

The prospect of failing and *surviving* could not be borne, so Edouard didn't permit himself to consider it. Instead he let the snores of the men around him lull him to sleep, and he dreamed of darkness and teeth.

The day began as it always did: the changing of the watch at four stirred Edouard briefly awake, and he lay in the relative darkness,

deciding whether or not he would rise. On this morning, though, Ruiz rapped his knuckles casually against the edge of Edouard's bunk.

Two hours. He swallowed down what might have been bile, then reached up until his fingertips brushed the bunk above him. In the light from the mess hall, he could see that the scars on the back of his hand had closed while he'd slept. Whether it meant the captain thought he'd learned his lesson or he was being lulled into a false confidence, he couldn't have said.

He lay still through the first bell, then rose with the second and put on his spare shirt and socks. The ones he'd tucked into his shoes were clean of blood now, which didn't surprise him particularly, but he stuffed them in his sea chest anyway so he wouldn't have to look at them. While the chest lay open, he took out his thin knife—his side arm would draw too much attention—and tucked the blade into his sleeve, glancing about only once to be sure he hadn't been seen. Then he straightened and followed a pair of men from his watch to the mess hall, where he unlatched a table close to the captain's empty seat. He dragged a chair up to it and drummed his fingers on the thin, solid steel.

The cook came stumbling through shortly after, rubbing at his eyes, and shut himself in the tiny closet of a galley to boil water for breakfast tea. He was an Englishman with indecipherable tattoos all along his upper arms; the marks might have been Chinese or ancient Egyptian or the language of Edouard's own contract for all he knew, but the ink had long since faded blue into the skin. The Frenchmen in the crew whispered that he was one of the contracted—for why else would an Englishman be hired as a cook?—but he served hot tea in the mornings, and for that, Edouard was grateful.

He wondered what would happen to the cook when he and Ruiz killed the captain. He wondered, not for the first time, what would make such a man sell himself into service.

Less than an hour. In less than an hour, I'll be free.

The second mate had stationed Ruiz with the navigators in the command center, fore of the mess hall. While Edouard drank his first cup of tea, he eyed the portal between the two spaces, hoping

to catch a glimpse of Ruiz at his watch. He thought he caught sight of Ruiz's short tail of hair just once, but he looked down again so he wouldn't be caught staring.

As was his habit, the captain came into the mess hall between the second and third bells, and as was his habit, he wore his coat buttoned up to the throat and a black glove on each hand. He took a glass of wine from the cook that sufficed to break his fast. His skin seemed less unnaturally pale after last night's exertions; a faint, hectic pattern of red colored his cheeks and either side of his throat, as though he had daubed them with blood.

For all Edouard knew, the captain had. He had certainly shed enough blood in that close little cabin.

The third bell sounded from the command center. Edouard restrained himself from flinching at the knell, barely permitting his hand to tighten on his cup. The slightest movement might betray him; he had only half an hour. The third mate hadn't risen yet, but he might enter at any moment, and Edouard would have to be ready for him.

A movement at the portal drew his eye. Edouard glanced over toward the command center, watching with a slow-growing horror as Ruiz stepped through the portal and into the mess hall, pocket knife held low at his side.

He said three bells, thought Edouard with a mounting sense of panic. *He said three bells, and I told him four, and I thought he* understood *me* . . .

Edouard rose from his chair, still sluggish with shock, groping for the knife in his sleeve and missing the handle. The blade slipped free of the horn sheath, but he caught it before it fell and clattered to the floor. He hissed as it dug deep into his palm, but Ruiz was already halfway to the captain and this was *all fucking wrong* because the captain was turning to Ruiz with his wine-stained needle teeth, and Edouard let the sheath fall and flung the knife, watched it stick deep in the captain's chest—

The captain closed one gloved hand around the hilt, wrenched the knife free to parry Ruiz's blow and send the pocket knife spinning, then drove the blade hilt-deep into Ruiz's neck. Ichor soaked the

captain's coat; Ruiz's skin smoked where blood and viscous black fluid met, and Ruiz was screaming and clawing at the knife. The captain dragged his glove off and brought fingers like gleaming tendrils to Ruiz's cheek, fixing them in place with dozens of clinging suckers. The men in the command center came running, but they caught in the bottleneck of the portal, all of them shouting over each other, and no one could hear a damn word because a voice was thundering in their heads, clawing them open from the inside.

Do you want to live? that voice asked, inexorable as time. Edouard felt his body coming apart at the seams, his blood turning to mustard gas in his veins. He wanted nothing more than to tell that voice *Yes*.

"Go to hell," said Ruiz, but even Edouard could see the way Ruiz's blood spilled over the knife hilt and onto his shirt.

Do you want to live? asked the voice, and in the secret spaces of his heart, Ruiz must also have said *Yes.*

The gash in Ruiz's neck closed over as soon as he pulled the knife free, and out from that healing flesh issued a spiral of inky words. Some of them Edouard knew from his own contract, but the rest only made his eyes water and swim. *Him too,* he kept thinking. *I've given that monster* him*, too.*

The captain's breathing was labored, though; each breath made a horrible, bubbling sound, as though fluid were pooling in his lungs. He dabbed now and then at his lips with a handkerchief, and the handkerchief came away black-stained. The captain's voice had gone thick and rough, and his dark eyes never blinked. "Question them," he told the third mate, who gave a sinuous nod.

They might have been brothers, the captain and the mate; they had the same pale skin and clean, spare features. They were a pair of porcelain figures, thought Edouard, made to deceive mortal eyes. The captain had simply made himself a prettier mask.

The crewmen chained Edouard and Ruiz in the observation deck, where the viewports let in a kind of murky, watery sunlight. In the shadows at the portal, the third mate stood with his pale, bare

arms folded over his chest.

He didn't speak. That was the terrible thing—he asked nothing, and still Ruiz answered him as though compelled.

"I planned the whole thing," he said when the mate fixed him with a baleful look. "I saw what he'd done to Montreuil. I said he was running out of time, and I told him, at three bells I was going to kill the bastard. I confess."

Confess echoed in that steel trap of a room, and Edouard felt himself—felt *someone*—closed in a confessional booth with his hands balled up tightly on his knees and the shadow of his confessor showing through the screen. He felt as though his sins were being wrung out of him.

No. Not *his* sins. Edouard had never been a Catholic, but he wondered for the first time if Ruiz had.

"I convinced him," said Ruiz, raising one manacled hand to his cheek to touch the marks there. They itched, Edouard knew. His own had itched like week-old wounds when he'd gotten them. "I made him do it. I told him if he didn't mutiny with me, I'd kill him—I'd put him out of his misery."

Misery brought with it the heat of Algiers, where *la Légion étrangère* had drained the marshes almost a century ago. It meant those long, awful nights listening to Lefèvre with his little Algerian boy, hearing the old man panting and huffing while the child made no sound at all. It meant that slow-boiling rage of being helpless to stop it. Then, like a miracle, the realization that he had a gun, and a man with a gun could remake the world to his liking.

"Yes," said Ruiz, and all around his irises showed the whites of his eyes. "That's why I did it. That's why." When the third mate tilted his head, Edouard heard *Why* like wind between the tenements. He—no, Ruiz—stared at the street beyond the narrow window while his father said *Why did your whore mother curse me with such a son? Son of a bitch, Fernando Ruiz, you'll look in my eyes when you talk to me, or I'll—* and he snapped *Don't call me that, you bastard. My mama named me Farid.*

"I deserted my post," said Ruiz. "We were bound to fly out to the Canary Islands to catch a cargo ship, and I told them to go

fuck themselves. I wasn't a pirate. No one would take me, so when Montreuil said there was a job . . ."

"Hmm," said the third mate. "Hmm." He stretched his long, white arms over his head, letting his shirt ride up over his stomach, and in that gap between hem and waistband Edouard saw something writhing.

He felt the words welling up in him—the truth that he couldn't allow himself to speak—and he clamped down on them even though they burned like coals under his skin. Whatever game Ruiz was playing, confessing now would devalue his sacrifice and possibly see them both killed.

"I was so damn tired of being alone," Edouard said instead. "Ruiz had been a good . . . a good friend. I thought it would be easier, if I had a friend." *Friend* was evenings drinking together, cheap wine and laughter and the filth Ruiz whispered in his ear when they fucked against the wall of some anonymous bar.

"A friend," he repeated, and that word sounded small in his ears.

How long had it been? How many hours? The light filtering through the viewports was morning-bright, now. Within the next four hours they'd make landfall. Sardinia. He'd been there once, before the war; he remembered the sun on the ruddy roofs of Cagliari.

He raised his eyes to the electric lights along the walls. *Will I ever see the sun again?*

"Hmm," said the third mate once more. He turned to one of the crewmen in the command center, directing him to remove Edouard's chains. "The captain will want you," he said, and it might have been an order or a jeer, but Edouard climbed to his feet and saluted.

"Right away, sir."

"And tell Cookie to send water and sardines. Water for the prisoner. Sardines for me."

"As you say, sir."

An idea was brushing at the corners of his imagination, but he couldn't allow himself to bring it out into the light to examine for fear the third mate would rip it from his mind.

He can't be digging that deeply if we can lie to him. Better to flood his mind with something else, then—something innocuous and

impenetrable and *plausible*. As Edouard left the observation deck and made his way through the command center, he emptied his mind of all but music. He hummed a song he would forever remember in Ruiz's voice, and in his mind he recited the words of *Le Boudin* like a prayer.

Tiens, voilà du boudin,
Voilà du boudin,
Voilà du boudin
Pour les Alsaciens, les Suisses et les Lorrains . . .

No one would meet Edouard's eyes as he passed through the command center. This wasn't unusual—they *never* met his eyes, the bastards—and given his conduct this morning, they'd even less reason than usual to look on him with sympathy. The first mate didn't so much as raise his eyes from the steering array, although his hand brushed his side arm.

No mercy for traitors and mutineers.

When Edouard passed into the mess hall, a pungent whiff of soap-scent assaulted him, and he nearly slipped on the still-damp floor. They'd washed away the blood, but the ichor had burned into the steel. The galley window had been closed up, probably against the stench, which was all to the good; he'd need his privacy for this.

He stepped into the little closet of a galley, backing the cook up nearly against the narrow stovetop, then shut the door and let it latch behind him. "The third mate wants you to bring Ruiz water. And sardines for the mate." He pushed up the sleeve of his shirt to show the marks of his contract, radiating out from where the flesh had splintered, and looked down at them to be sure the cook saw.

The cook hesitated a moment, clearly trying to decipher what Edouard meant by showing his marks, but at last he touched his own and nodded. He gestured almost negligently toward the rubbish bin as he began to fill a cup with water. Cold water from the insulated reservoir, and not the boiled stuff in the kettle; Edouard could see condensation forming already on the glass.

A flimsy waxed-paper packet with a label printed in Spanish sat

in the rubbish bin. Something the cook had picked up in Tarifa, no doubt, but Edouard wasn't particularly interested in its origin. He fished it out, and the cook offered him a pencil, no more than a fingernail's length of wood with a bit of lead in the middle. "Sardines, too," said Edouard, and he wrote in English on that discarded paper, *We want to break our contracts.*

The cook nodded once.

Can you take a letter to Ruiz? He has a plan, wrote Edouard, and the cook brought his thumb and forefinger together to signify the smallest of spaces. It meant *A very short one.*

A very short one. A letter that would convey he would do whatever Ruiz asked, follow him to the grave if he had to. That he was sorry for having dragged Ruiz into this business, and that he had faith in Ruiz's ingenuity and sheer brass balls. *What now?* wrote Edouard on a sliver of paper only as big as his stub of a pencil, discarding the rest. The cook nodded, then slid the paper under the water glass, where the condensation caught it and held it fast. He held out his hand for the stubby pencil, then made it vanish into his sleeve.

The cook brought out a tin of sardines from the cabinet and emptied them onto a plate, which he put on a tray. He glanced up at Edouard, who nodded in return and opened the door again.

No one was up in arms, which probably meant their conversation had passed unremarked. Edouard didn't permit himself to look back, didn't permit himself to confirm the cook's departure, but only continued aft through the sleeping quarters.

Wherever the captain had walked, the steel was faintly pitted; wherever he'd steadied himself against a bulkhead, the metal had warped and aged as though it had spent a decade beneath the sea. Edouard tried not to think about that, and only hummed *Le Boudin* to keep the third mate's prying mind at bay.

He had no idea how this business worked, no idea what the captain was capable of doing. The third mate had broadcast Ruiz's thoughts like a radio play; could the captain do that? Could he reach into Edouard's mind, past that slow-time march, and drag out a plot against him?

No. The answer had to be no, or else the metal in the engine room

wouldn't be spotted as though with drops of acid. If the captain could have read his thoughts, then he'd have done so by now. He wouldn't have allowed himself to be surprised in the mess hall if he'd had any way of preventing it.

Nos anciens ont su mourir / Pour la gloire de la Légion, Edouard thought, bracing himself. If he was wrong about the captain, he'd be damning himself forever. If he was wrong about Ruiz, he'd be damning them both. *Nous saurons bien tous périr / Suivant la tradition. Tiens, voilà du boudin.*

He put a hand to the metal of the door, then raised his other hand and knocked.

"Come in," said a thick voice, rough and bubbling over with something unspeakable. Edouard worked the door open, just as he was bidden, and shut it behind himself.

The cabin was black as a cave. In the lightless space, Edouard could hear strange, liquid sounds, mouths swallowing and long limbs shifting in their own slime. The captain could probably hear his heart pounding against his ribs, probably even smell the fear radiating from him. *Let him see that I'm afraid, then. I can use that.*

The captain put a hand to Edouard's cheek, and for the first time, the hand felt human. Like an infant's, smooth and damp. The old, familiar tendrils wrapped ropelike about Edouard's body, but he scarcely noticed them with that impossible hand cupping his face. "My Edouard Montreuil," whispered the captain against his ear, his neck, his loin. "I don't have to tell you how disappointed I am in you."

"I understand, sir." Edouard leaned into the hand at his cheek. Kissed each fingertip, feeling the pads beneath his lips. "I was so afraid I'd killed you. Ruiz told me he'd kill me if I didn't go along with him. He said it would be a mercy. I thought he'd kill me—"

"And you didn't believe I would protect you?" The captain laughed, and that laugh became a cough, racking and rocking them both. "He is of no concern to men such as us. An old lover—"

"So you saw that." He tried to conjure grief, betrayal; he tried to imagine how he would sound if he'd been coerced into harming the man he loved. "I didn't want you to see that. But an old lover, yes. I

thought I could find him work here, but he couldn't bear seeing your marks on me. He would rather I die than belong to someone else."

"Such hot blood," the captain murmured. "But you're mine, aren't you? My boy. My beautiful boy with the broken hands."

In the darkness, a tongue swept over Edouard's wrist, his palm, his knuckles. He didn't even have to feign his shudder as the tip brushed over the web of scars there. The captain knew his scars as perfectly as any craftsman knew his work; he'd built each and every one of them from fragments of skin and bone.

"I'd like to prove to you I'm yours," whispered Edouard. "When we make landfall, I'll go into the sunlight for one last time. Sardinia's not a bad place for that, I think. I visited once, when I was a boy . . ." He shook his head, as though dispelling a dream. "In any case. After I've said goodbye to the daylight, I won't disembark again. I don't want to disappoint you again. I'll stay here, with you."

"Forever?" laughed the captain, low and rough and drowsy. "This isn't a fairy story, Edouard Montreuil. This isn't 'La Belle et la Bête.'"

"I know. I'm a military man, sir; I've been a military man as long as you've known me. This is . . . this is a considered decision."

"Briefly considered."

"Fully considered. It's what you want of me, isn't it?"

Isn't it? He realized, for the first time since they'd met in the darkness on that battlefield in France, that he had no idea what his captain really wanted. He felt that new, sweat-dewed human skin against his face, though, and he thought, *Ah. Of course. Of course that's what he wants. That's what he meant when he said he wanted my body. Somehow, our contracts let him play at being human.* "You want my blood and my flesh—and those are yours."

"And I want the sunlight on your skin," said the captain softly. The touch of his many limbs felt light, sluggish with exhaustion or pain. A cough rocked him, and Edouard felt the skin at his own throat burning with the spill of diluted ichor; he restrained a cry, instead lacing his fingers through the captain's until he could feel the bones beneath that new skin. "Go ashore at Sardinia. No more promises of staying under the water with me."

"No more," Edouard agreed. "But I'll come back to you."

"You could never run from me, Edouard Montreuil." All around him, the long limbs drew away, curling into the darkness with their hundred mouths and their veins pulsing with acid. All around him, the cabin grew quiet.

"It's the furthest thing from my mind," said Edouard, and with that he let himself out.

The cook caught up with Edouard just before they were set to disembark in Sardinia. He jostled Edouard's elbow at the ladder, dropping a sack of dried peas that all went clattering across the floor. "You piece of shit!" Edouard snapped. "You'll break our necks like this." But he bent to sweep up the spilled peas with one hand. With the other, he picked up the tiny slip of waxed paper the cook had let fall to the floor.

He didn't read it at once; the other crewmen would be watching him after such a public fiasco, and he couldn't risk their seeing his note or connecting it with the cook. Instead, he waited at his bunk, listening with half an ear while the first and second mate had a long talk about the rota and the crew on refueling duty. He caught whispers now and then, something like *third mate says* and *with the captain in his state*.

It had occurred to him before that it was odd how the first and second mate took the third mate's orders as though they came from the captain himself. He'd thought that was because the third mate was the captain's pet. His leashed monster, waiting to be set loose on whoever disobeyed.

Now, remembering the captain's new hand and the long, white arms of the third mate, he wondered if it wasn't the other way around. *Ruiz gave the captain that hand. Who'd given the third mate his?*

When the new rota went up, Edouard was unsurprised to find he'd been granted shore leave. *I want the sunlight on your skin,* the captain had told him; of course he would be granted shore leave, whatever he'd done and however the crew felt about him. The captain would want to drink that sunlight through his pores, wringing the

light from him as though he were a wet cloth. What did surprise him, though, was that the other men had been granted a day's leave when they'd been led to expect an hour at most.

He needs time. Time enough to recover from his wounds.

Ruiz's name was not on the list. He would remain below while the rest of the crew surfaced, left to the mercies of the captain and the third mate. As the ship rose into the harbor at Cagliari, Edouard tried not to think too hard about what his old friend was enduring for his sake.

He knelt by his sea chest and withdrew his gun, sliding it into the back of his waistband. The jacket next; he unfolded it and thrust one arm into a sleeve. Whatever Ruiz was planning, he would probably need to be armed, and there would be little enough chance to conceal the weapon when—

Someone drew the gun out from his waistband, and he froze.

"Hmm," said the third mate. Edouard willed his muscles to unlock and slowly raised his head, looking over his shoulder and into a pair of unblinking eyes. The third mate tucked the gun under his arm, then held out his hand, fingers twitching. "The holster," he said.

Edouard's throat constricted as though a limb had coiled there. He couldn't entertain the idea of resistance for fear the mate would lift it from his mind; he had to be obedient. Pliant. Without a word, he handed over the holster and the belt to which it was clipped. He never let his fingers brush the mate's.

The third mate examined the gun in the dim light and then slid it into the holster when he'd finished. "I let you run around this submarine because the captain *likes* you," hissed the mate. He looped the gun belt about his narrow waist, cinching it closed and buckling it. "But I don't like you. And I don't like you running around."

"I'm sorry you don't like me." Edouard willed himself to stay on his knees, eyes cast upward, no matter how he longed to wring the third mate's neck. *They like it when we kneel.*

"If I were choosing, I'd open you like a can of sardines. Put a key in and *twist*." He smiled and licked his lips with a pale, pointed tongue. "Bet you'd be delicious."

Edouard fought down a shudder. "I imagine I would be. Our

captain seems to think so."

"He *does*." The mate curled his pale, damp fingers in Edouard's hair, drawing his head back until he was afraid his neck would snap. His breath was cold on Edouard's cheek. "And one day I'm going to stop indulging his little games and chew you up."

He brought his long tongue to Edouard's throat, licking there as though to savor the taste of him. Edouard remembered the brush of teeth on his skin on the battlefield. *Just let me go. God, Jesus, please. I don't want to die. I want to live.* He shuddered hard, tasting bile in the back of his throat. If this creature decided to keep him here—

The third mate straightened with a wet laugh. "Never forget what we are. And while you're on shore leave, think of what I'll be doing to your mutineer friend."

The ship's cook was first up the ladder, preceding even the engineering team sent out to refuel the submarine. From the bottom of the ladder, Edouard watched him suck in a long, deep breath of the Italian air and proclaim, "Bracing!"

"Get out, you old son of a whore," snapped Valancourt, the engineering assistant, as he gave the cook's ankle a firm rap with his fist. "The rest of us want to get out of this old can, too."

Edouard climbed out somewhere in the middle of the pack, behind the engineers but before the second mate. He slid his hands into his pockets as he stepped onto the deck, closing his fingers on the tiny slip of paper the cook had given him. It was nothing as good as a gun—

White hands on the portholes, teeth gleaming with each flash of lightning, black wings buffeting the hull. "Cut the bastards down or they'll hit the gasbag!" cried the mate, and he—no, Ruiz—*swung the porthole open and put his gun between those empty black eyes. The creature screamed like a woman being murdered.*

Edouard sagged against a mooring bollard, hand to his head. In the sunlight, over the cry of the gulls and the chatter of dockworkers, that scream chilled him to the marrow.

I'd open you like a can of sardines. Put a key in and twist.

Ruiz was still down there.

He had to hope that Ruiz had a plan. He walked along the docks, head down, until he was quite sure he'd left the last of his crewmates behind. Then, and only then, did he dare to take out the slip of paper.

On one side of the paper was his own question: *What now?* Turning it over, he saw only *C. Borzellieri.*

C. Borzellieri. A name. How do I find him?

He struck off for one of the new warehouses, keeping an eye on the spaces between buildings. When at last he caught sight of the telephone wires hanging slack between a support pole and a warehouse, he turned toward the main office.

His Italian was rusty, but he was Swiss; he'd grown up speaking three languages. "Can I borrow your telephone?" he asked the manager on duty, relishing how easily the words came to mind when he wanted them. "I'll only need it for a minute."

The switchboard operator was politely baffled by Edouard's request for a *Signor* C. Borzellieri. The only C. Borzellieri in Cagliari, as it transpired, was *Claudia* Borzellieri, and with the warehouse manager listening in and the switchboard operator monitoring the call, he switched quickly to Spanish to afford them both a modicum of privacy. "Farid," she said over the phone, when Edouard mentioned Ruiz. Her voice was like Ruiz's, smoke-rough and edged with laughter; she spoke Spanish with a Castilian accent that she'd picked up God only knew where. "Well, if you're a friend of Farid's, you'd best come up."

She lived in a grim, collapsing villa near the warehouse district, the ruin of a more hopeful era. Thick iron bars had been screwed in over the windows, and the porch before her door smelled strongly of cigarettes. Edouard knocked once, and the door rocked on weak hinges. He stepped away when he heard the bolt slide back.

The door opened only a crack, and a woman who must have been

Claudia Borzellieri peered out from behind it. He could see little more than her eye, the dull red of a scarf over her graying hair, and the barrel of her gun. "Name yourself," she said.

"Edouard Montreuil. A friend of Farid Ruiz."

"Frenchman," she said irritably.

"Swiss."

"That's worse." She let out a long breath through her nose, then lowered her gun. "Algiers?"

He nodded. "Algiers. May I come in, Signora Borzellieri? It's urgent."

She swung the door open for him, and out of habit, he closed it behind himself.

Her front room had the look of a place that had once been claustrophobically furnished, with broad swaths of wall unstained by smoke or sunlight. He could easily imagine there had been a bookshelf on the south wall, a high-backed settee beside it, a potted plant where the wood of the floorboards had lightened around a circle. The room was Spartan now, stripped of its rugs and its elaborate furnishings. A sagging sofa huddled against the north wall, out of the line of sight from the windows.

"Urgent," Claudia said once she had drawn all the curtains closed. "When Farid tells me something is *urgent,* he only ever wants one thing. And it's not my *culo*."

Edouard gave her a wary look, and she raised her brows and flung herself down on the sofa. "He wants explosives," she said, tapping a fingertip on the magazine catch of her gun. "So are you going to tell me why Farid Ruiz wants explosives, or am I going to have to guess?"

She didn't offer Edouard a seat, so he remained standing before her like a supplicant as he told her the whole sordid tale—his contract with the captain, how Ruiz had agreed to help him break it, how badly the assassination attempt had gone awry, how when he'd asked, *What now?* Ruiz had given him her name. How the third mate had licked his lips and told Edouard to imagine what he was doing to Ruiz.

"Poor bastard," she said when he'd finished, still tapping lightly at

her gun as though indexing its pieces. "I wonder what they're doing with a submarine."

"Can you help him?" He felt that old familiar panic stirring beneath his sternum, imagining what the third mate might be doing to Ruiz in that lightless cabin. He imagined those mouths latching onto Ruiz's heavy shoulders, that sensitive place beneath his ribs. "He said you could help him—"

"Shut your mouth, Swiss. Hang on one damn second. You've gotten yourself into this mess by making stupid plans and executing them badly, and that shit's got Farid written all over it. So what you're going to do now is sit down for one goddamn second and *think.*" She gestured him to the far side of the sofa, and he heard the old springs groan beneath him as he sat.

"All right," he said, after a fortifying breath. "Why does it matter what he's doing with a submarine?"

"It matters," said Claudia, "because if that thing's just joyriding, then anything you do to that submarine isn't going to stop it, just piss it the hell off. These creatures . . ." She pursed her thin lips. "They've got affinities. Alliances. And what they're trying to do by making contracts is *break* those affinities. Copy our shapes and come up out of the water or the darkness or wherever the hell they come from."

"Become more human," said Edouard, but she shook her head.

"Human's only a part of it. They need to be *adaptable.*" Claudia laid her gun on her lap. "I read the papers, you know; I see what we're doing. Mallory getting himself lost up on Mount Everest—they see that too, and they say, here's a bunch of apes getting damn close to the top of the world." She took out a pouch of tobacco and a paper, then began to roll herself a cigarette. Her quick fingers put the cigarette together in the space between two breaths.

"And that's what they want. To be on top of the world." Edouard took out a cigarette of his own, offering it for a light.

"That's what *I* think they want," she agreed, striking a match for them both. "And damned if I know how they use contracts to do it, but there you are. Bureaucratic sons of bitches. So now what you've got to ask yourself is, is that thing just fucking around on that submarine, or is it there because it *has* to be?"

Edouard remembered the whine of the mortar falling, the electric pain where his hands had been, that voice in the darkness asking, *Do you want to live?* He remembered the teeth catching on his skin, ready to devour him. He remembered shuddering in the blackness, wanting more than he ever had to *live*. "I don't know," he said. "I haven't the first idea how I *would* know."

"*Think*!" she snapped, blowing smoke in his face. "You've lived with the damn monster for a year. What does it like? What are its . . . I don't know, what are its *habits*, some fucking thing like that."

Edouard remembered the mirror in that cabin, the electric lights, the papers he'd never identified. The contracts on his own skin and the cook's. "He never eats," he said. "He only drinks wine."

"Good," said Claudia. "More. And call the damn thing *it*; we're talking about a monster here."

The mirror. The hundred mouths. The way he fucked Edouard in the darkness. Those lips tracing the scars on his arms. *I want the sunlight on your skin*, he'd said. "Dark," he said. "H— it prefers the darkness."

Claudia sucked her cigarette nearly down to her fingers, then flicked the ash to one side. "Now, *that's* useful. Wonder what would happen if you got that thing into the sunlight."

Edouard took a drag on his own cigarette to steady his nerves. "I need to know," he said very deliberately, "whether you can help me. If you can, I'm willing to compensate you. If you can't, then I'll be on my way."

"I don't think I want to make a deal with a man like you, considering your history with contracts."

His heart sank at once, but she held up her free hand to forestall him. "I *will* just *give* you a bomb. Because you might be a bastard, Montreuil, but Farid had my back when we tried to keep the fascists out, even if he wasn't a socialist. He was a good comrade, and he's in trouble now because *you* put him there."

Edouard could not refute her, so he kept his silence. She sat waiting for him to speak for a second, then nodded as though she was pleased and ground out the fag end of her cigarette against her boot heel. "Good. I'm going to give you a bomb that you can carry right

onto your submarine, and no one will give it a second look. So what you've got to do is get your crewmen *off* it, plant the thing below the waterline, and get the fuck out of there. And you've got to do it while you still have some daylight to work with."

She rose from the couch, and Edouard followed. The doors they passed were all shut tightly (and locked, too, if Edouard read Claudia as well as he thought he did), but at the end of the hall, she unlocked a narrow door that led to a narrow downward stair. "Don't follow me," she said, and he obeyed.

There must have been electric lighting in that narrow stair, but if there was, he never saw it. She shut herself into the darkness, vanishing for ten long minutes.

When she returned, she was carrying a well-worn Bible. "Say someone was worried for your soul, if they ask." She pressed it into his hands. "No one will think twice if you let it slip behind your bunk."

"Thank you. When I want to set it—?"

"There's a timer inside." She opened the heavy book to show him the mechanism beneath the cover. "Push the little lever all the way to the end. That should give you five minutes. More than enough time to get the hell out."

"And Farid?" he asked. "They have him chained at the observation deck." Dimly, he registered that it had been a long time since he'd called his old friend Farid.

She shrugged. "Steal the keys. Find a hammer and *break* the damn thing. I'm a demolitionist, not a goddamn locksmith."

"And I'm a soldier, not a blacksmith."

A crooked smile. "If you're a soldier, then it's time you started acting like one."

Edouard found the second mate at a barber's near the docks, and claimed the empty chair beside him. "I need you to get aboard and wake up anyone who's stayed to sleep. I don't care what you do. Just get them ashore."

"We've never had a successful desertion on the *Flèche*," said the

second mate as the barber scraped his cheeks clean of soap and hair. "You know we've never had a desertion. What you're planning is—ngh!" The barber's blade nicked his chin.

"Please do not speak, *signor*," said the barber.

Edouard drew in a breath through his nose. "It doesn't matter what I'm planning. They can come back this evening. I really don't care. I just need you to be sure they're not aboard *this morning*."

The second mate gazed at him aslant, one cheek still covered in foam. "I don't want to know what you're planning. It will probably see you killed, and I don't want anything to do with that."

"It might," Edouard allowed. *I'll have to try something else. Wake them all before I plant the bomb and tell them . . . what? What would make them leave and not restrain me on the spot?* "I don't think it'd do any harm, though, to tell the first mate and the chief of engineering that there's a football game on. Engineering versus navigation?"

In the mirror across the room, Edouard watched a smile creep slowly over the second mate's face. "No harm at all. Shirts versus skins? Tell the first mate I'd lay money on engineering. If that doesn't get him ashore, nothing will."

Word of the game passed quickly among the crewmen who'd come ashore. "Engineering versus navigation," Edouard told Valancourt, who sucked on the end of a toothpick with a meditative expression. "I'm told there's money riding on it. The second mate's bet on you."

"Did he really?" Valancourt glanced at another engineer's assistant, one brow arching. "Didn't think there was anywhere to play football on this damn island. Where's the match? Do you know?"

Edouard consulted a tourist map and found them a likely open space, and the address passed from mouth to mouth. The cook took up the call without prompting, climbing back down the ladder to proclaim that engineering had declared war on navigation.

Aboard the submarine, the first mate took to the idea with nearly patriotic fervor. "Get up, you layabouts," he bawled in a parade-ground voice, rattling the bunks of his burliest navigators. "The chief

engineer's cooked up another scheme to impugn our honor, and I *won't have it*—up, up, up!"

The men peeled off their blankets or roused themselves from card games and checkers at their posts, because if they had only one form of entertainment while submerged, it was in watching the perennial rivalry between engineering and navigation. With the first mate's dispensation, the remaining seamen surged up the ladder and into the sunlight.

The cook stopped by Edouard's bunk on his way back out, folding his inked arms over his chest and regarding Edouard through his thick spectacles. "Will you come?" he asked, every syllable measured. "It promises to be a good match."

Edouard held up his new Bible. "I thought I'd stay in. The sun's getting to my head, and it's cooler down here."

"All right." The cook freed one hand to lay it on the Bible. "Between you and me, I'm putting my money on navigation."

"Funny," said Edouard. "We've crewed together a year, and until today I'd have thought you were an engineering man."

"A man gets sick of the sound of the engines." The cook took his hand away and replaced it in his pocket. "Enjoy your reading, Montreuil."

With that, he turned toward the aft ladder and climbed slowly to the top. His boots vanished through the hatch, and Edouard could hear his footfalls on the hull.

In the dimness of the crew quarters, Edouard gathered himself. There was nothing in his sea chest he would miss. He had no further duties to discharge to the crew. He had only to plant the bomb in the head, pick up a hammer and chisel in the engine room, overpower the third mate, and free Ruiz in time for them both to make it out the hatch.

It would be so easy to do nothing at all. The last year had schooled Edouard well in the ways of submission before an insurmountable threat. How well he'd learned to sit on his hands and allow himself to be used if it would save his skin.

One day I'm going to stop indulging his little games and chew you up.

No one ever said what the third mate did to deserters and mutineers. No one had to say.

In his mind's eye, he saw those searing letters over Ruiz's neck and cheek, and he heard Claudia Borzellieri saying, *You might be a bastard, Montreuil, but Farid had my back*.

He could sit idly by when his own safety was at stake, but he could never condemn Farid.

Slowly, carefully, he rose from his bunk and stepped into the head. It was a tiny, sparse little room—just a shithole with a lid to keep the stink from getting out—and the door didn't latch.

He opened the book and hooked his finger over the lever on the timer, drawing it all the way to the far side. The hidden spring tensed under his fingertip. Then, releasing the lever, he put the book on the floor beside the wiping catalogue.

It felt like sacrilege, but that couldn't be helped. Claudia had been the one to hide the bomb in a Bible.

Hurrying now, he slipped down the narrow passage to the engine room. There were toolkits there, pliers, hammers, wrenches. He gave the array one long glance before choosing a claw hammer; it was the closest thing he could find to a chisel. He slid that through his belt, all the while glancing at the portal to the captain's cabin.

The door was shut. The door was always shut.

When he made it back into the crew quarters (carefully, *carefully*, footsteps had to be light or the third mate would wonder why he was running), he forced himself to breathe. Four minutes. Maybe four minutes and change. Through the mess hall, past the tables left down when the men had vacated them. Cards and checkerboards lay out on the tabletops, games abandoned.

Through the command center, empty of the partisans of navigation. *Skins*, he thought, and immediately wished he hadn't, because in the doorway between the command center and the observation deck stood the third mate, leaning against the frame of the portal with one long leg stretched before him. Edouard couldn't help imagining the navigators' skins laced together into a patchwork for the third mate's human mask.

"Going somewhere, pet?" the third mate asked, his voice no more

than a hiss. "You aren't allowed to see the prisoner. No one is allowed to see the prisoner."

There was no time to wheedle his way in; there was no time for anything but to raise his hammer and drive the clawed end deep into that unblinking eye. The third mate gaped and gouged at him with blunt, white fingers, hand catching in the buttons at the front of Edouard's shirt and ripping them clean away—and then like a klaxon sounding between his ears, like the shriek of metal shattering and tearing, Edouard felt the mate screaming. That searing black blood fell in a spray across his bared chest, burning where it touched.

Burn *was the inquisitor's branding iron on his feet*—burn *was smoke choking him and showers of sparks setting him alight*—burn *was mustard gas filling his lungs and boiling him from the inside—*

Edouard surfaced with long tentacles wrapped around his neck and looping over his upper arms. His throat was burning, his eyes stinging, but he closed out the echoes of other men's deaths and thrust the hammer into the mate's remaining eye before those tentacles could tighten. Then he wrenched his stolen gun out of the holster and put three bullets in the bastard's mouth.

Long tentacles wrapped around his legs, his waist, each muscular tendril squeezing and spasming in the third mate's death throes. He drove the creature back from the portal, and that fluke's-belly face shattered and spilled out a hundred mouths that vaporized as they fell into shafts of watery sunlight. For a moment that stretched forever, Edouard felt himself drifting over the abyssal plain of the sea, dim white lights at his every extremity, his many mouths latching onto tiny blind fish that swam by him in that benthic blackness. He felt himself yearning for the sun from that deep place that was all he knew—

Then, like a light switching on, Edouard was free. "Ruiz," he breathed, then wrenched loose his claw hammer and knelt at Ruiz's side. The ichor had worn the head of the hammer dull.

"About goddamn time," said Ruiz, spreading out the chains that fixed his arms to the wall in preparation for the hammer's strike. His body was whole, but God only knew what the mate had put in his head. "Good," he said, as the first blow separated half a link; "*Good*,"

he said, when the other half parted under a second blow. Edouard raised his hammer to sever the chains that bound Ruiz's legs.

At the height of the backswing, though, a blow like an earthquake rocked the ship, and Edouard was thrown from his crouch. The hammer went clattering across the observation deck, tumbling end over end until it fetched up against the lip of the portal. "Shit!" Edouard scrambled across the floor after the hammer, but the hull was groaning and tilting, and the floor was slick with stinging blood and slime. "Damn it—"

"Where did you put it?" asked Ruiz, and at first Edouard thought he meant the hammer, but no, he meant the *bomb*.

"In the head. Should slow the captain down." His hand closed on the hammer, which had fallen in a pool of blistering ichor; the metal was degrading and the floor was pitting, and he flung himself across the canting deck to pound desperately at the chains.

"No," said Ruiz. "No, you stupid man, don't you—"

"I'm not leaving you behind," he snarled as he drove the flaking iron against tempered steel. "I'm not leaving you behind, Farid Ruiz; don't make me—"

Ruiz caught him by the chin and drew him up for a searing kiss. His tongue drove past Edouard's lips and licked the inside of his mouth, stealing Edouard's breath away entirely. "You idiot," he growled against Edouard's mouth. "Get that bastard's blood over here and *put it on the chains.*"

On the far end of the submarine, Edouard could hear seawater gushing and catching and pooling, but *here* there was only the glass that had carried Edouard's message. It lay against the far wall, cracked, dripping with slime, and he dove for it.

Edouard Montreuil.

The voice echoed in his skull like the toll of a great bell, vast and resonant. Edouard froze with his hand closed on the base of the glass, hearing the pain in that voice and feeling it as though it were his own.

Betrayal. Misery. *Edouard Montreuil,* it said again, and through the slow-rising waters, over the failing electric lights, snaked dark tendrils like the limbs of a sea-beast.

Edouard forced himself up from the floor with a glass full of ichor braced in one hand, the submarine canting dangerously toward the engine room and the officers' quarters. The captain's cabin was probably embedded in the sand on the floor of the harbor, the observation deck hanging free of the surface and settling into the water. He couldn't climb the slick, steep deck, so he strained up, feet against the wall, to pass the glass into Ruiz's hands.

Before Ruiz's fingers could close on that cracked glass, the first tendril caught Edouard's ankle and yanked him back against the portal. He splayed there, free leg braced against the wall, free hand scrabbling at the frame. *Stay,* said that infinite voice. The ichor bled through the cracks in the glass, burning a track down Edouard's wrist. He struggled against the captain's grip, but with every kick and twist the tentacle only tightened. Above him, clutching his own chains to keep from slipping, Ruiz looked down with an expression of pure terror.

His eyes locked with Ruiz's. *If I fail, we'll both be dead.*

Edouard drew his arm back and flung the glass, ichor arcing in a long spray across the sloping floor.

Stay beneath the water with me, Edouard Montreuil. I'll wrap myself around you in the trenches, and I'll make you a god of the deep—

The sound of the glass shattering pulled Edouard back to the observation deck, and then Ruiz toppled onto him and began sawing at the tight-wrapped tentacles with the broken glass. A shriek echoed in Edouard's head, and the tentacles flexed and released him.

"We don't have time for this!" snapped Ruiz, catching Edouard's arm and dragging him over the third mate's corpse as the tentacles withdrew down the passage. He urged Edouard up the nearest ladder, shoulder pressing hard against Edouard's hip as Edouard worked the screw to open the hatch. The screw was well-greased; it turned quickly, quickly, then fell open with a clang. A lashing tendril seized Ruiz by the wrist, but he scored it with his broken glass and sent the captain screaming into the gathering water.

Edouard burst into the sunlight and flung himself to the dock, falling hard enough to embed splinters in his cheek. Ruiz came after him like a cannonball, landing heavily across Edouard's back.

Atop him, Edouard felt Ruiz panting. In the aftermath of what they'd done, with the sun's rays falling lazily on the docks and the submarine sinking and rolling on its side like a reeling boxer, Edouard could think of nothing he wanted to do more than soak up the sunlight and feel Ruiz's chest expanding with each breath. He could see the hole he'd blown in the side of the ship, raised like a window toward the sunlight. Yet he was *alive,* both hands whole, and it felt like a goddamn miracle.

"We should run," said Ruiz.

"Run?" said Edouard, half-incredulous. "I can't even *move*."

Ruiz nudged Edouard's shoulder, then pointed down the docks to where the police officers were beginning to mass. "Run," he said, and he didn't have to tell Edouard a third time.

"Ah," said Ruiz, eyes closing as he brought his cup to his lips. "No one makes coffee like an Italian."

Claudia nodded as though it were an article of faith. She didn't believe in tea. She also didn't believe in taking sugar with her coffee—"Imperialist," she'd said when Edouard asked—or in iceboxes, which meant that by the time Edouard and Ruiz found themselves on her sofa, the morning's milk was tepid and starting to crust at the edges of the bottle.

Edouard took the milk in his coffee anyway, although it went down thickly. It seemed rude to refuse, after Claudia put the bottle down on the floor beside the sofa and gave him a pointed look.

To hear her tell it, all of Cagliari was abuzz with the news of the explosion on the *Flèche*. "It will be in the papers tomorrow," said Claudia, lighting a cigarette and gesturing with it as though it lent her an air of expertise. "I read the papers, you know. I get *L'Unione Sarda* delivered."

"There's little enough else to do on Sardinia," said Ruiz. "Drink, fuck, blow things up, and read *L'Unione Sarda*."

"Shut your damn mouth, Farid," laughed Claudia, crow's feet marking the corners of her eyes. "If you want something to do, the

socialist party's hiring. We'll kick the fascists out of Italy by 1930; you can put money on *that.*"

"I never bet on politics," said Ruiz, and although his eyes were shining, there was a melancholy note to his voice. *I thought I could kill all of the bastards*, he'd said in Tarifa with the same wistfulness. *And then the good men would rise to the top*. "It's the only race where the favorite horse always wins."

"And you'll always back the kicky little nag at the rear of the pack," she said, with a sharp look to Edouard that made his stomach clench.

Ruiz met his eyes, then Claudia's, then put down his cup and folded his hand over Edouard's. "I've made worse decisions."

Claudia tilted her head, then drained her coffee and put the cup aside. "That's my cue to leave you two alone, is it?" she asked, smirking. "Bet you're damn glad to be alive, after that—" her gesture took in the new wounds across Ruiz's cheek and around his right eye, the marks at his wrist where the suckers had fastened. "That *mess*."

"Glad to be alive, and thankful you can take a hint, Signora," laughed Ruiz. "Do you still keep those spare rooms, for . . .?"

"Fugitives?" Claudia supplied. "That I do. You're looking for a bed, then?"

Once again, Ruiz met Edouard's eyes. His look said, *It's your choice.*

Edouard fixed his gaze on the pitted skin over Ruiz's cheekbones and the inked marks that hadn't faded with the sinking of the *Flèche*.

I owe him my life. But that's not reason enough to say yes—it never will be again. Only wanting him is.

"Yes." Then, more firmly, "Yes, we're looking for a bed."

"Your old room is how you left it," said Claudia to Ruiz, taking out her key ring and selecting one old silver key. "Lock the damn door, and keep it down."

She pressed the key into Ruiz's free hand, and he pressed his thumb against the heel of her hand. That quick touch, not firm enough to be a handshake, spoke volumes about the comradeship they'd shared. As Ruiz released her, Edouard wondered how they'd

fought side by side before the fascists had come to power. How had Ruiz had her back? What had they destroyed together, and what had he been trying to build with her?

Then Ruiz was tugging Edouard to his feet and down the hall, to one of those locked rooms on the way to the closet with the narrow stair inside. He fit the key into the lock, and the tumblers clicked into place.

At the doorway, he pulled the lamp chain. After the Spartan squalor of the front room, Edouard was surprised at the neatness of this little space. The sheets were dusty, but clean; the wall had never seen the stain of smoke. The room was windowless, but the lamp left no part of it in shadow. To one side of the bed stood a slim bookcase, its shelves almost bare. A battered volume of *The German Ideology* stood alone on the topmost shelf, a slip of paper standing out like a bookmark near the front cover.

Seeing Edouard looking, Ruiz smiled faintly and locked the door behind him. "She tried to make a communist of me," he said. "It didn't stick."

"But you fought beside her anyway."

"I hate fascists, and she needed my help," Ruiz said as though it were easy: a woman wanted to destroy her government, and she needed his help. Perhaps it *was* easy, for him.

Edouard turned to regard him, all warm brown skin and laughing eyes and dark hair falling out of the short tail at the base of his skull. *A beautiful man,* he thought, sitting on the edge of the bed. *A man I don't understand, not even a little bit.* "That was enough for you, was it?"

"It was enough." They remained together, neither one speaking, until at last Ruiz laughed and reached out to ruffle Edouard's hair. "Jesus *fuck*, stork, you know how to seduce a man, don't you? Talk his ear off about fascists until he surrenders!"

Edouard caught him by the wrist and dragged him close, pulling Ruiz to sit on his lap and wrapping an arm around his waist. At first, Ruiz's eyes went wide; there was a row of circular welts beneath Edouard's palm, and he *knew* how it must feel to be closed in with the memory of those sucking limbs so close to the surface. He let

Ruiz go, leaning back onto the bed. Letting him choose how close he wanted to be.

After a short pause, Ruiz reached out to touch the lines inked on Edouard's chest. None of Claudia's shirts had fit him, and she hadn't had a button jar, so the torn front of his shirt had gone unrepaired. Looking down at the warm brown skin of Ruiz's hand, the lined skin over his knuckles, Edouard pushed away the memory of the third mate's clawing fingers. "I'll have you know," said Edouard, low, "the first time we slept together, I was trying to make you stop talking about fascists."

"Wily old Swiss," laughed Ruiz, but now his hips were grinding slow and easy against Edouard's. "And you did, too. Put your cock in my mouth and shut me right up."

"Put my cock in your ass and made you scream for the Virgin Mary."

"You didn't have *oil*," said Ruiz, but he was bending down to kiss Edouard's throat, teeth scraping—

(*the captain's needle teeth— no, ordinary teeth, ordinary lips suckling at his skin.*)

"And you don't have any now, either. I've already put my ass on the line for you once today; I'm not doing it again."

"Then shut me up." The heat in his voice surprised him. All at once it occurred to him he was about to bare his body to another man, offer it to be opened and penetrated and used, and he should have closed up like a vise at that. He should have said *no* when Ruiz's thumb hooked at the corner of his mouth, pad tracing his lip and the tip of his tongue. Even that light touch sent his pulse racing; even that barest incursion made his breath go shallow and quick.

"This is on your terms," said Ruiz, close enough that his breath warmed Edouard's cheek.

Edouard met his eyes, then nodded once so Ruiz could see. He curled his hand over the swell of Ruiz's cock, hot and firm beneath his trousers, then worked the fly undone. "Shut me up," he said again, and Ruiz slid two fingers along the line of his tongue as though he meant to gag him. Edouard felt his throat constrict, his eyes water until he had to close them, and there were teeth against his skin and

this *shouldn't* be making him hard. He swallowed against the pressure of those two fingers, swallowed and sucked and rocked against the weight of Ruiz on his chest, and all around him was the smell of cigarettes and coffee and the salt air of Cagliari.

He opened his eyes on Ruiz's earnest face, all sun-touched with freckles and gleaming with new scars. *This* was the man who was fucking his mouth; this was Farid Ruiz, lips parted and pupils blown, trousers pulled down past his thick cock. Edouard tried to say *Here, come here, come and fill me,* but the words broke into nothing on those hot, firm fingers.

"Do you want me now?" Ruiz asked, but before Edouard could begin to nod, Ruiz was sliding up along the marked expanse of Edouard's ribs as though he knew the answer. He drew out his fingers, slow and easy, trailing them over Edouard's neck and down to circle his nipple.

"Yes," said Edouard, his mouth dry and his throat raw. "Yes. Farid. I want you now."

He took Ruiz's cock into his mouth, feeling it graze the roof of his mouth. He closed his lips over the head and sucked, taking in the sweat and the warmth and the human taste of him, the ridge of the foreskin and the throbbing veins along the shaft and the heat of those thighs over his shoulders and the helpless sounds Ruiz was making against his hand.

He took all of it in, and when Ruiz brought his spit-slick hand down to wrap it around Edouard's cock, he couldn't mistake it for anyone else's. That hand was human and hot and friction-rough, and Edouard's cock was caught between lifeline and heartline. They rocked into each other, fitting themselves together at a frantic pace that spent them almost at once. A shudder seized him, and he was hitching and writhing under Ruiz's fingers only moments before Ruiz jerked against his mouth.

They lay together in that narrow room afterward, Ruiz carding his fingers through Edouard's hair and Edouard working Ruiz's shirt buttons undone. *I'll have to stop thinking of him as Ruiz,* he thought idly. *We're not Legionnaires anymore. We're a different kind of comrades, now. Men can't survive a business like the* Flèche *without being changed*

by it.

As he splayed his palm over Ruiz's heart, though, he couldn't help studying the lettering that still curled from cheek to neck to breastbone. What happened this morning was a reprieve rather than an escape, and he couldn't let himself forget it.

But he was done running. He was done with pleading for bare survival, bargaining with the reaper for every breath.

So long as Ruiz had his back, he was ready to turn and fight.

Also by Peter Hansen

Changing the Guard, a short story in
Storm Moon Press's Weight of a Gun anthology

About the Author

Peter Hansen is a teacher, writer, and former spelling bee champion who lives a stone's throw from the Erie Canal. He got his start in publishing with his college newspaper, where he was forced to write "I will not rake the muck" one hundred times on the chalkboard before they let him write editorials. With that gritty, real-world experience under his belt, he promptly turned to science fiction and fantasy. He spends his days teaching young writers about the pathetic fallacy, his evenings mainlining iced tea, and his nights building a time machine in his basement. You can find Peter at peterhansenfiction.com.